NCA
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DOUG ROBERTS

LEBANON

ANNCR:

HOPES FOR PEACE IN LEBANON FOLLOWING THE RECENT SWEARING IN OF PRESIDENT ELIAS SARKIS HAVE FADED SOMEWHAT DESPITE A REPORTED LULL IN HEAVY FIGHTING IN THE MOUNTAINS EAST OF BEIRUT. VOA CORRESPONDENT DOUG ROBERTS WAS RECENTLY IN THE LEBANESE CAPITAL AND SENT THIS ANALYSIS.

VOICE:

THE ULTIMATE OBJECTIVES OF THE CURRENT RIGHT WING AND SYRIAN OFFENSIVE AGAINST LEFTIST AND PALESTINIAN FORCES IN THE LEBANESE MOUNTAINS REMAIN UNCLEAR. BUT THE MOST SIGNIFICANT ASPECT OF THE FIGHTING APPEARS TO BE THE SYRIAN ROLE. THE WARRING LEBANESE AND PALESTINIAN FACTIONS HAVE FOUGHT FOR NEARLY A YEAR-AND-A-HALF NOW WITH NEITHER SIDE DEMONSTRATING POTENTIAL FOR AN OVERALL MILITARY VICTORY. BUT IT IS CLEAR THAT THE PRESENCE OF THE WELL-TRAINED AND EQUIPPED SYRIAN TROOPS ON EITHER SIDE IN THE CONFLICT COULD EASILY TIP THE BALANCE. THE COMPARATIVE EASE WITH WHICH THE SYRIAN FORCES DROVE LEFTIST AND PALESTINIAN TROOPS OUT OF MANY OF THEIR MOUNTAINSIDE STRONGHOLDS IS PROOF OF THIS.

RIGHTIST LEADERS HAVE BEEN INSISTING THAT PALESTINIAN TROOPS WITHDRAW FROM THE MOUNTAINS AND OTHER AREAS THEY HAVE OCCUPIED SINCE THE WAR BEGAN HERE IN WHAT THE RIGHTIST AND CHRISTIAN GROUPS SEE AS A VIOLATION OF THE CAIRO ACCORD, AN AGREEMENT SIGNED IN NINETEEN SIXTY-NINE REGULATING THE PRESENCE OF PALESTINIAN COMMANDOS IN LEBANON. RIGHT-WING LEADERS AND SYRIA CHARGED THAT PALESTINIAN GUERRILLAS HAVE BEEN INTERFERRING IN LEBANESE AFFAIRS. PALESTINIAN LEADERS SAY THEY ARE PREPARED

TO ABIDE BY THE CAIRO ACCORD, BUT THEY SAY THEY CANNOT RECALL THEIR TROOPS FROM THE MOUNTAINS UNTIL SYRIAN FORCES HAVE STARTED A SIMILAR WITHDRAWAL BACK TOWARDS THE SYRIAN BORDER. LEFTIST MUSLEM LEADERS SUPPORT THE PALESTINIAN POSITION.

THE MOUNTAIN BATTLE CAN ONLY INCREASE THE ALREADY FORMIDABLE BURDEN ON THE SHOULDERS OF PRESIDENT SARKIS. ALTHOUGH PRACTICALLY ALL MAJOR MILITARY FORCES IN LEBANON, INCLUDING SYRIA HAVE PROCLAIMED THEIR SUPPORT FOR THE NEW PRESIDENT, MISTER SARKIS REMAINS WITHOUT AN EFFECTIVE FORCE OF HIS OWN. BETWEEN TWO AND THREE THOUSAND ARAB LEAGUE TROOPS HAVE BEEN TRYING TO KEEP THE WARRING FACTIONS APART IN BEIRUT, BUT FIGHTING CONTINUES IN THAT CITY AS WELL AS IN THE MOUNTAINS AND OTHER PARTS OF THE COUNTRY.

MISTER SARKIS, A FIFTY-TWO YEAR OLD FINANCIAL EXPERT, IS NOT GIVEN TO FREQUENT PUBLIC STATEMENTS AND APPEARANCES. SINCE HIS INAUGURATION LAST MONTH, HE HAS BEEN MEETING WITH VARIOUS FACTIONAL AND POLITICAL LEADERS STEADILY AND PATIENTLY TRYING TO PROMOTE PEACE. DESPITE THE GRIM SITUATION, MANY OBSERVERS BELIEVE THE ELEMENTS OF PEACE ALREADY EXIST IN LEBANON. THEY SAY A GROWING NUMBER OF INFLUENTIAL LEADERS ON BOTH SIDES ARE READY FOR NEGOTIATIONS -- READY EVEN FOR COMPROMISE. AND PRESIDENT SARKIS WHO HAS REMAINED NEUTRAL THROUGHOUT THE CONFLICT COULD WELL PROVE TO BE THE CATALYST THAT WILL TRANSFORM THE READINESS INTO A POLITICAL SETTLEMENT OF THE CRISIS.

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